WHY BLENDED LEARNING WORKS
(and can work for you!)

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What is blended learning?

It’s helpful to start by looking at an example – NHS: The Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Programme.

The background:

KPMG is the consortium lead for the co-design and co-delivery of three of the largest leadership programmes in the NHS: The Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Programme, The Nye Bevan Programme and the Executive Fast Track Programme. These are the largest ever public sector professional leadership development programmes to transform the working culture of the NHS, by creating confident, inspiring, empowered leaders at different levels throughout the organisation.

The challenge:

The NHS is internationally renowned and, like all healthcare systems, it faces many challenges. It must deliver better and more compassionate care, which is effective and efficient.

The NHS has received negative press in relation to the estimated financial gap (circa £60bn) facing it by 2025, as well as the need to show improvement for its patients, service users and carers, most notably highlighted in the Mid-Staffordshire Review. A key recommendation from the Mid-Staffordshire Review to improve services is better leadership.

The challenge was to design and deliver programmes which support leadership across the healthcare system to improve the quality of care and outcomes.

The approach:

The KPMG-led consortium contains renowned UK and international academics, as well as specialist organisations, including LEO and Unspun.
What is blended learning?

The design and delivery of the programmes apply high-quality expertise to blended learning, with virtual resources, building on workshops and team coaching. Psychometric testing and 360 degree feedback are used to raise self-awareness in the programmes. Up to 80% of the programmes are delivered online and have received excellent feedback from learners. They have bespoke, leading-edge content that places patients at the heart of the programmes and requires participants to engage in experiential learning and apply their learning in the workplace. Face-to-face workshops and learning sets are supported by a Moodle-based Virtual Campus. This provides learning technology to enable access anytime, anywhere. It allows participants to engage in interactive scenarios, watch videos and presentations, access further resources, record their learning, work alongside their tutors, build support networks, and engage in leadership discussions. This increases participant relevance of their learning to the workplace. The KPMG-led consortium provides onshore first and second line helpdesk support for participants.

Outcomes:

The programmes have been widely acclaimed and recognised both in the UK and internationally with the KPMG-led consortium, winning a prestigious award in the Brandon Hall Group Excellence Awards for the Best Use of Blended Learning. In the first year, the Virtual Campus alone has facilitated learning and networking with over 7,900,000 hits on the site and over 200,000 forum posts and more than one million views of those posts.
Additional evidence of outcomes from feedback to date:

- The KPMG-led consortium programmes have received excellent feedback so far, demonstrating a new generation of confident, entrepreneurial public servants. Examples of feedback comments from participants include:
  - “The workshop was highly effective in changing some of my attitudes and behaviours.”
  - “I thought it was a privilege to be able to access such good quality facilitation.”
  - “It’s a brilliant programme, so well thought out. I’m really fortunate to be on it.”
  - “What I’ve taken most from the programme is a huge sense of confidence in my ability to deliver.”

**Impact on learners**

Scores based on “strongly agree/agree

- 96% better able to demonstrate all other module learning outcomes
- 98% understanding and developing leadership practice had increased
- 93% I and my team remain constantly in tune with how the quality of care provided to patients matches what we would want for the people we love most
- 97% have applied their learning in the workplace

94% of the participants found the Virtual Campus ‘useful and easy to use’.
What is blended learning?

On the Nye Bevan Programme, 35% of respondents confirmed promotions, acting-up\(^1\) or enhancements in their current role as a direct result of the programme within a month or so of graduation.

But we shouldn’t think of blended learning as simply a mix of technology and classroom-based workshops. It is perhaps more helpful to think of blended learning as being a mix of approaches to learning, which can be more or less supported by technology.

\(^1\) Defined in this context as ‘doing the job of the grade above you but without a promotion’.
Definitions of blended learning

There have been many definitions over the years and people don’t always agree on them. Many of them are quite techno-centric, focusing on mixes of technology and offline work.

We prefer to think of mixes of learning approaches and activities, and only then to consider where technology might appropriately support those activities.
In her book Teaching As A Design Science, Professor Diana Laurillard talks about how various forms of learning might be supported by technology. Transferring this to a workplace context, people learn in different circumstances:

- by observing others at work
- by trying things out
- by discussing concepts with others
- by collaborating with others
- by practicing skills or procedures in a safe or simplified environment
- by reading, watching or listening

These different learning approaches might be supported by digital in a variety of ways. For example, discussions can take place face to face, but it can also take place on the phone, in an online forum, in a webinar, or possibly in future in a virtual environment using VR technology. Similarly, it is increasingly possible for collaboration to be remote, for people to work on projects together without being co-located.

There are interesting questions in that case about how people become part of a community of practice with people they work with daily but might never meet.

Then there is practice in the context of the ‘fire drill’ or trying something until you master the art, which could happen in a digital simulation, and of course reading, watching and listening could involve ebooks, podcasts or online videos and animations. So there are many ways in which learning might become more digital, but there are also, at least for some topics, great advantages in learning in a face-to-face group environment. This is one of the main reasons why blended learning has the potential to bring together the best of both.

To put that into context, imagine having to interview a candidate for a role when you have never done a job interview before. How do you learn to do it? You might want to observe a few experienced individuals conducting interviews, and you might want to read up on the approved HR process. In this scenario, you are already observing and reading and analysing, which are all quite different activities. The observation could happen as work shadowing or it could take the form of watching video recordings of best practice techniques.
But then you would also probably want to practice asking questions and making judgements and ideally, you’d want to do that in a safe environment so that you could make any mistakes you are going to make in an environment designed for safe experimentation. Ideally, you would also want some immediate feedback, so that if you are getting the phrasing of questions wrong, you can correct that sooner rather than later. This type of practice could take place with a coach, in a workshop, or in an online simulation (and perhaps in the future in a virtual-reality based simulation). Now that we’ve added to the mix, you might want the opportunity to ask an expert questions about more unusual interview scenarios, as well as have a couple of aide-memoires that can jog your memory if there’s a gap in time between your first interview and the next one you do.

In putting all that together, you have a mix or blend of different activities, all aimed at mastering a technique. That mix could be partly online, entirely online (with videos, forums, simulations and webinars) or completely offline.

Regardless of whatever form it takes, there is a mix or blend involved and that blend is aimed at helping learners master a new technique as fully and efficiently as possible.
The history of blended learning
Blended learning as a concept for adult education has been evolving for a long time and there are different definitions or understandings. We can trace its roots back to the first distance learning or correspondence courses going back to the 19th century.

More recently, with the formation of the Open University (OU) in the UK in the 1960s, distance academic courses became a more common experience, with the OU trailblazing and setting the standard. Even back in the 1970s, you could argue that the experience of studying on an OU course was somewhat blended, with the A101 arts foundation course, for example, consisting of reading, Wednesday evening lectures, records with music related to the course, and occasional day trips to view relevant architecture, as well as an optional Summer school. In addition, the OU made TV programmes which complemented their courses, although they were sometimes broadcast at rather anti-social hours.

But blended learning is perhaps more commonly understood as a mixture of technology and face-to-face classes. Although technology has been used to support learning ever since films were screened in US schools back at the start of the 20th century, the standard definition of blended learning as being a mix of technology-supported learning and face-to-face learning probably really emerged in the late 1990s with the advent of CD-ROM-based interactive courses and then online courses.

Certainly, this widely accepted understanding of blended learning started to be much more common as a concept, and also more often the subject of academic debate, in the early 2000s. Often blended learning was understood in Learning and Development (L&D) circles quite simply as being a short eLearning course containing underpinning knowledge which had to be taken and passed before attending a facilitated workshop, or perhaps a workshop followed by eLearning.
The 7 main benefits of a blended learning programme
There are clear benefits in creating an appropriate mix of learning activities – what that mix is will depend on what is being learned but could include a mix of observation, analysis, practice and accessing learning content via reading, listening or watching. Introducing technology and digital learning into that mix of activities can also offer benefits. Here are seven benefits of introducing a blended learning programme.
A well-executed, narrated and animated process is intuitively much easier to comprehend and follow than a series of process diagrams on a piece of paper or in a PowerPoint, and it can be rewound at any points of confusion. There is research by Richard Mayer and Ruth Clark3 among others that backs that up.

It’s now relatively straightforward to video internal experts giving their considered opinion about a topic which makes that expert accessible to learners, en masse, in ways which just wouldn’t be possible without the video and the means to deliver it efficiently. It probably wouldn’t be possible to bring your organisation’s foremost expert in a specific topic to give an opening address at the start of every classroom training session, but it is possible to video them and offer that video at the start of a blend.

Practice in a safe environment

A point stressed by Broad and Newsom⁴ in their research into workplace learning is the vital importance of providing practice opportunities, case studies and simulations. By moving knowledge acquisition to elearning tutorials, workshops in the blend can be more clearly focused on practice. Additionally, online case studies and practice scenarios can further enrich the learning experience to ensure knowledge and skills transfer.

A softskills or decision-making simulation can be repeatedly retaken to enable people to hone skills in a way that just isn’t possible or affordable in a classroom environment. Another interesting study conducted by Sara de Freitas⁵ suggests that digital simulations can be significantly more effective in some cases than other forms of learning.

We know that stories are important for learning (see the LEO insight on Storytelling for more). There is even evidence that they are stored in a different part of the brain to facts, in such a way as to make them more memorable and easier to retrieve. Case studies are a great way to help learners with sense-making and they can be offered in blended learning courses in such a way as to make them easier to understand and revisit.

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⁴Transfer of Training: Action-Packed Strategies To Ensure High Payoff from Training Investments by Mary L Broad and John W Newstrom. ISBN-0-201-19274-8
Blends can be designed to fit into people’s very busy working lives with tailored modular activities.

Modern work/learning patterns as surveyed by Towards Maturity:

There is increasing evidence that ambitious and senior managers want to learn in short periods of time, and often engage in learning supported by technology outside of standard working hours. It is therefore important that learning provision be designed with this in mind.

Table 6: Where and when are leaders learning what they need for their job?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of sample</th>
<th>Directors</th>
<th>Senior managers</th>
<th>Line managers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On the way to/from work</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When travelling to see clients</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At my desk</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During breaks</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At lunchtime</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evenings and weekends</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the point when I need them the most</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whenever I’m alerted to updated information</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from 2,109 managers taking part in the 2014 Learning Landscape Study. Table reproduced with the permission of Towards Maturity.

We saw similar patterns with managers studying on the NHS leadership programme.
But it’s not just managers. User research undertaken with end-of-life carers for the NHS end-of-life and palliative care programme found that 15 minutes per day is the most that workers could dedicate to learning.

Lack of time is often perceived as a barrier to learning. Client internal research has suggested that learners were sceptical about the value of one-off classroom interventions and felt that learning needed to be more of “a ‘process’, where participants can practice, and develop their skills over a period of time.”
Other findings included that “It was common for respondents to suggest they would prefer to take up a programme of learning, rather than choose products individually, where a syllabus was created for them.”

A modular blended approach which offers people guidance as to which learning they should do in which order, and provides modular learning that can be consumed in short periods of time, over time, may help address these challenges.

If there are multiple shorter online activities, it is easier to schedule 15 minutes per day, or even per week, to study. We know that operational staff are often rostered in 15 minute slots, which is an important thing to know about the realities of their working environment. It may not seem ideal to structure learning in this way but 15 or 20 minutes are the lengths of time that consistently people report as possible to set aside each day.

Similarly, using effective online approaches means that workshops can become shorter and more modular, as upfront definitions and underpinning knowledge can be delivered online. Alternatively, workshops may remain the same length, but be devoted entirely to group practice and discussion, rather than upfront knowledge transfer, thereby making the most of people’s time together.
Scaffolding and learner journeys

To quote Development Dimensions International® (DDI)

“Training should not be approached as a one-time event. Instead, training should be seen as an integral part of the “learning journey,” which should be closely aligned with the challenges facing an organization and what leaders must do to drive the business forward. This journey takes place over time and consists of multiple formal and informal learning components and experiences. It begins with a review of relevant organizational and assessment data, the business drivers, and the target audience’s development gaps. This information can then serve as the starting point for designing the learning journey.”

Blended learning can take learners on a journey, which can present information and practice opportunities to them in an ordered way, helping them first to engage with new concepts, make sense of them, understand how they are relevant and identify skills gaps, then to focus on learning new concepts and mastering new skills, and finally to embed them into working practice.

*Be Better Than Average: a study on the state of frontline leadership by Richard J. Wellins, Ph.D, Aviel Selkovits and Debbie McGrath, DDI: http://www.ddiworld.com/DDIWorld/media/trend-research/bebetterthanaverage_t_ddi.pdf*
Scaffolding and learner journeys

**EMBED**
- **Transfer** – how reports will be using job aides
- **Transfer** – how to encourage reflective learning
- **Reminders** – what your reports will be getting
- **Transfer** – what your reports are saying

**ENGAGE**
- **Comms**
- **Diagnostics, 360** – how to discuss feedback with your report
- **Line manager led discussion** – templates and checklists
- **Context** – new insights and interest provoked via storytelling, TED style intros, serialisation

**FOCUS**
- **Discussion** – tips for engaging with your reports as they start their focused subject
- **Practice** – overview
- **Test** – access to results
- **Discussion**
- **Practice**
- **Text**
Increased reach and take-up

Making learning easier to fit into people’s working lives should act to increase reach and take-up.

Additionally, technologies such as virtual classroom technology enable people to gather at the same time for a workshop, but not to be in the same place, which is important from a purely practical perspective. Additionally, digital online forums can promote dialogue between people who are in different timezones and would otherwise struggle to keep up a regular discussion or dialogue.
Combating the forgetting curve

All the way back in 1885 Dr. Ebbinghaus noticed that just as there is a learning curve associated with acquiring new information and skill, there is a similar ‘forgetting curve’ that illustrates how knowledge may be lost over time without sufficient support and practice.

Effective interventions therefore need to draw on learning strategies that help cement learning in such a way that the learning is more likely to be retained.

Source: Hermann Ebbinghaus, Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology, 1885/1913
I’ve written about the significance of using spaced learning to help combat the forgetting curve before. Here’s one of the salient points to remember: “There is a body of research that suggests that spacing learning and practice over time helps people learn more efficiently and remember better. It has been found to be effective in various domains, from sales training to language learning to medicine.”

Blending your learning, so that learners can choose to learn little and often over time, and can also revisit activities to refresh their memory, can help people to both learn more quickly and to remember better. This should help combat the forgetting curve in ways that will be richer and more effective than relying on memory alone or on scribbled notes from a workshop session.

[Typical Forgetting Curve for Newly Learned Information]

The failure of learning to transfer effectively from face-to-face workshops to the workplace has been recognised as a challenge for many years. Around 25 years ago, Broad and Newstrom’s book *Transfer Of Training*\(^8\) analysed the results of a series of studies into the effectiveness of transfer and outlined important recommendations which remain true today. More recently, a doctoral study conducted into the transfer of learning from a face-to-face executive education programme run by a leading business school found identical issues related to the failure of participants to transfer insights gained in the classroom back to their working practice.

Among the recommendations Broad and Newstrom make is the importance of involving managers in supporting transfer of training, something which LEO’s blended model supports via manager guides and prompts for manager discussions. A survey conducted of top executives by John Kotter\(^9\) (1988) reported four major factors that frequently inhibited success of training and development efforts to improve performance in managers – the most powerful of which was a lack of involvement by top management in the behavioral change process (reported by 71% of respondents).

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What evidence is there for the effectiveness of blended learning?
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The answer is, quite simply, a lot. Take a look at this LEO case study, which details learning solutions delivered for the NHS East of England.

Background:

NHS East of England sought a new way to reach a group of learners with varied working patterns – a broad audience of non-clinical staff (care home workers), carers working in prisons, and home-based carers/relatives of terminally ill patients.

Flexibility was crucial because of the varied and disparate nature of the audience, including a large amount of ESOL learners.

10 English as a second or foreign language.
What evidence is there for the effectiveness of blended learning?

The approach:
A blended programme was designed to tie together elearning, animation and video with face-to-face workshops, train the trainer packs and mentoring. This solution offered multiple channels to help learners develop their skills around palliative and end-of-life care. The programme was launched and tracked via a Moodle learning management system (LMS), where the elearning and wider blended material was designed to improve skills and knowledge and facilitate practice of key behaviours. The programme contains an appropriate mix of components suitable for delivery as stand-alone elements or as part of the wider solution.

The outcomes:
Roll-out was so successful that the blend was implemented nationally. Independent research undertaken by the University of Bedfordshire into the outcomes of the learnings, known as the ABC programme, showed significant positive impact on key measures such as learner confidence in having difficult conversations with residents, manager confidence and bottom line measures such as numbers of preference forms filled out and reduction in hospital admissions.

Key findings included:
- The ABC programme has enabled 16% (n=38) more patients to pass away in their place of choice and prevented admissions to acute care areas.
- The educational programme has significantly improved the confidence of care home staff to deliver end-of-life care and this confidence appears to be linked to care improvements. Staff undertaking the programme rated their confidence before and after the programme. Mean scores increased from between 5.49 to 10.52 as a result of the programme.
- Participants undertaking the ABC programme were very positive about their experience and valued the support of the facilitators and access to the elearning materials.

Don’t just take our word for it – look at what other industry experts have to say
Towards Maturity is a great resource for understanding emerging trends, as they conduct a year-on-year benchmark study, and the associated report always makes for fascinating reading. They highlight what the ‘top deck’ (how they refer to the top 10% of organisations) are doing, and one of the areas of greatest difference between the top deck and others is in having the resources in place to support blended learning.

Looking at other industry analysts, such as Josh Bersin, we see that he reports that CEOs are increasingly seeing the value of digital learning and viewing it as important to help their organisations adapt to our ever more rapidly changing world. The thought leaders seem to agree: blended learning is likely to be increasingly important to learning and development organisations everywhere.

Studies conducted by Training Industry support this, showing that:

- 79% of respondents report that offering alternate formats of training materials was very important or essential to the support of training initiatives12.
- 52% of companies use between three and six modalities to deliver sales training13.

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“DDI’s Global Leadership Forecast 2011 found that organizations that have highly effective development programs use 32 percent more methods of development. But it is not just about the quantity; it’s about the quality. And the quality comes from a focus on more than just formal learning; it comes from a true focus on continuous learning and learning journeys.

Training should not be approached as a one-time event. Instead, training should be seen as an integral part of the ‘learning journey’, which should be closely aligned with the challenges facing an organization and what leaders must do to drive the business forward. This journey takes place over time and consists of multiple formal and informal learning components and experiences. It begins with a review of relevant organizational and assessment data, the business drivers, and the target audience’s development gaps. This information can then serve as the starting point for designing the learning journey.”
Insight from IBM

“There are many reasons to consider a blended curriculum. We can talk about learning styles, budget considerations, content and format suitability, and even scheduling and travel costs. We’ve learned, however, that perhaps a more compelling reason to consider a blended curriculum is the learning makeup of today’s new workforce. It’s not possible to offer these dynamic new employees a meaningful learning experience, suiting their core characteristics, without using a varied blend of delivery modalities.”

Insight from Shell

“The new [blended] design [of Shell’s Maintenance Professional Discipline Foundation Course] has had an immediate impact, with high assessment scores, very positive reactions from participants, and most significantly, some immediate, but unforeseen, positive business impacts...

The business impact has been equally impressive. The event has helped staff close competency gaps, identify and solve business problems, and share advances and latest technology across widely different parts of Shell’s operations. There have been significant cost-savings directly attributable to the tasks required during the event. In a later survey, 68% of participants confirmed a business impact during the course of the event.

The blended learning format is poised to revolutionise industry training.”
Whether you’re calling it blended or its new but less frequently preferred moniker, multi-modal, the concept of blended learning is nothing new.

While many organisations still think of blended learning programmes only as a combination of face-to-face training and elearning, this isn’t necessarily the case.

Blended programmes have evolved because they are an effective form of learning that takes into account a time-poor workforce’s learning needs. Technological advancements mean that blended learning programmes can be both designed and delivered using the most appropriate channels in order to maximise impact.

A final word on blended learning
At LEO, we have designed and deployed many successful blended learning programmes. To discover how our blended learning solutions can increase learning impact contact us today.

About LEO

Imogen Casebourne
LEO’s Director of Learning

As Director of Learning, Imogen focuses on drawing insights from both user research and wider academic debates about how people learn. She works with the learning design team to ensure that LEO’s learning solutions remain cutting edge and evidence-based.

With over 20 years of experience, Imogen plays a key role in LEO’s thought leadership programme and undertakes research and consultancy for LEO’s clients. Imogen has a particular interest in multi-device learning and started designing mobile solutions in 2005, creating a number of successful personal digital assistant (PDA) courses and educational mobile games.